

## From Servitude to Slavery in 17<sup>th</sup> Century Virginia

**Objective:** The students will be able to relate how servitude evolved into slavery for people of color in 17<sup>th</sup> century Virginia.

**Virginia Standards of Learning:** This activity addresses:

### **Skills**

- VS.1 The student will develop skills for historical and geographical analysis including the ability to
- identify and interpret artifacts and primary and secondary source documents to understand events in history;
  - determine cause and effect relationships;
  - compare and contrast historical events;
  - draw conclusions and make generalizations;
  - make connections between past and present;
  - sequence events in Virginia history;
  - interpret ideas and events from different historical perspectives;
  - evaluate and discuss issues orally and in writing;

### **Colonization and Conflict: 1607 through the American Revolution**

- VS.3 The student will demonstrate knowledge of the first permanent English settlement in America by;
- identifying the importance of the arrival of Africans and women to the Jamestown settlement;
- VS.4 The student will demonstrate knowledge of life in the Virginia colony by
- explaining the importance of agriculture and its influence on the institution of slavery; and,
- USI.5 The student will demonstrate knowledge of the factors that shaped colonial America by;
- describing colonial life in America from the perspectives of large landowners, farmers, artisans, women, indentured servants, and slaves;

**Directions for teachers:** Using the information provided in the activity, allow students to investigate and discuss the evolution of servitude to slavery for people of African descent in 17<sup>th</sup> century Virginia.

**Activity:** In 1645, in Northampton County, Virginia, the clerk of the county court recorded that two county residents, Captain Philip Taylor, a white man, and Anthony, a black man, had walked a piece of ground together in which both had an interest. The men agreed to divide the property, and Anthony told the clerk he was pleased with the agreement because, “I know myne owne ground and I will worke when I please and play when I please.” (T. H. Breen and Stephen Innes, “Mine Owne Ground”: Race and Freedom on Virginia’s Eastern Shore, 1640-1676, page 6).

### **Questions:**

- 1) Based on the clerk’s report, what can you surmise about the social status of Anthony? Was he a slave, an indentured servant, or a freeman? Explain your answer.
- 2) Is there anything in the clerk’s report that surprises you about the meeting between Anthony and Captain Taylor? Explain your answer.

From the above account, we can document that some people of African descent were free in 17<sup>th</sup> century Virginia, and even owned land. But what social and economic status did Africans, who first arrived in Virginia in 1619, and their descendants have throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> century in Virginia?

August 1619, John Rolfe recorded the first arrival of “20 and Odd” Africans to Virginia. (Susan Myra Kingsbury, ed., *The Records of the Virginia Company of London*, III, page 243). They were brought to the colony by an English ship, the *White Lion*, sailing under a Dutch letter of marque that allowed the ship’s crew to legally privateer Spanish and Portuguese ships. The *White Lion* captured a Portuguese slave ship, the *São João Bautista*, in partnership with another English privateer, the *Treasurer*, and they removed about 200 Africans from the slave ship, of which “20 and Odd” were brought to Virginia. (Engel Sluiter, “New Light on the ‘20 and Odd Negroes’ Arriving in Virginia, August 1619”, *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Series, LIV, No. 2, April 1997, pages 395-398). Unfortunately, no documents have been found telling us more about these first Africans in Virginia, and scholars today debate their status: slave or indentured servants? All we can say with certainty is that these people were brought to Virginia against their will and made to work, either as servants or slaves.



A census or “muster” was taken in the colony between January 20 and February 7, 1625, to determine the colony’s population and other vital facts. There were 1,218 people, 934 males and 270 females (14 people unidentified), living in 187 different “musters” or households grouped into 21 major plantations spread along the banks of the James River. Each “muster” of a household listed the people living there, and among the 1,218 people “mustered” there were 23 Africans living in Virginia. Each household’s residents were identified by name, age, and in some cases, on what ship they arrived in the colony and the year. However, for most Africans the information provided about them was much different than that provided for white residents. Below is one example of how most household musters recorded their white and black residents.

**The Muster of Sir George Yeardley, [living at Jamestown]:**

Sir George Yeardley, Knight, came in the *Deliverance* 1609

Temperance Lady Yeardley came in the *Faulcon* 1608

Mr. Argall Yeardley aged 4 years

Mr. Francis Yeardley aged 1 year                      Children borne heare

Ms. Elizabeth Yeardley aged 6 years

**[Yeardley's] Servants At James Citty**

Richard Gregory aged 40

Anthony Jones 26                      [All four] came in the *Temperance* 1620

Thomas Dunn 14

Thomas Phildust 15

Thomas Hatch 17 in the *Duty* 1619

Robert Peake 22 in the *Margaret & John* 1623

William Strange 18 in the *George* 1619

Robert Thompson 40 in the *London Marchant* 1620 [and] Ann his wife

Richard Arrunell in the *Abigail* 1620

George Deverill 18 in the *Temperance* 1620

Thomas Barnett 16 in the *Elsabeth* 1620

Theophilus Beriston 23 in the *Treasuror* 1614

Negro Men 3

Negro Woemen 5

Susan Hall in the *William & Thomas* 1618

Ann Willis in the *Temperance* 1620

Elizabeth Arrundell in the *Abigail* 1620

(Virginia M. Meyer, ed., Adventurers of Purse and Person Virginia 1607-1624/5, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, page 29).

**Questions:**

- 1) Based on the above muster for the Yeardley household how would you classify the Africans: slaves or servants? Explain your answer.
- 2) Why do you think the names and ages of the white servants are given but not of the Africans? Explain your answer.
- 3) Of the 23 Africans and their descendants listed in the 1625 Muster, only seven are identified by name and only one of them by his complete name. "Angelo a Negro Woman in the *Treasuror*"[who lived in Jamestown with Captain William Peirce and his wife, Joan]; "Antonio a Negro in the *James* 1621" and "Mary a Negro Woman in the *Margaret & John* 1622" [living at the Bennett plantation: "Wariscoyack"]; "Antoney Negro: Isabell Negro: and William Theire Child Baptised" [living with Captain William Tucker in Elizabeth City]; and "John Pedro, a Negro aged 30 in the *Swan* 1623" [living with Captain Francis West at "Elizabeth City beyond the Hampton River"]. (Virginia M. Meyer, ed., Adventurers of Purse and Person Virginia 1607-1624/5, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, pages 31, 48, 51 and 64). Why do you think these Africans and William, the child, had their names provided in the muster? Why do you think John Pedro had his full name listed? Explain your answers.
- 4) Do you think the 1625 Muster could be used to show that people of color were treated differently in Virginia than white people? Explain your answer.
- 5) If a group picture was taken of you and your classmates, and everyone in the picture were identified by their name, but you were identified only by the color of your skin, or by some other criterion, how would you feel? Explain your answer.



Many historians cite the 1625 muster as evidence of racism in Virginia, but it is also noted that the black people are listed as “servants” and not slaves. It is believed by many historians, based on the scanty evidence available, that up until mid-century some or most 17<sup>th</sup> century Virginia Africans and their descendants existed in a state of servitude that allowed them to somehow gain their freedom, as did white indentured servants upon completion of their indenture. A prime example of this is Anthony Johnson and his wife, Mary. Of the seven Africans who were listed by name in the 1625 Muster, both Anthony and Mary can be found at the Bennett plantation (see Question #3 above). We do not know when Antonio, or Anthony, and Mary became man and wife; when he took his sir name, Johnson; nor much about him and Mary from 1625 to 1650. By 1651 he received 250 acres of land in Northampton County on Virginia’s Eastern Shore based on five “headrights”. (A headright was 50 acres of free land granted to anyone who paid for the passage of a person to Virginia; each person so transported earned their master an additional 50 acres of land). This title of 250 acres of land indicates Anthony and Mary were free persons in the colony. They had four children, two girls and two boys. Two major events in their lives intimate they were granted some of the same rights as free whites in Virginia.

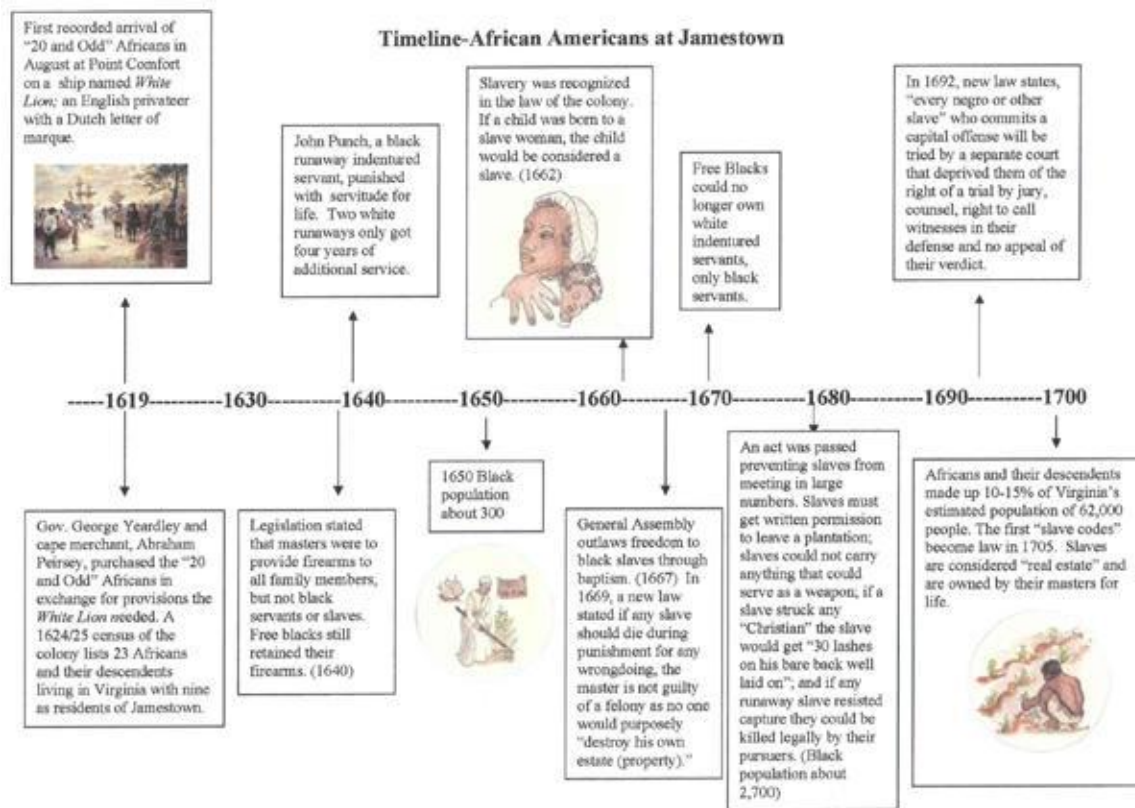
First, in 1653 a major fire destroyed much of the Johnson’s household, and local officials visited their devastated estate and agreed the Johnson family needed financial relief. This was provided when the Johnson’s petitioned their county court and received a waiver of county taxes, called tithes, for Mary and their two daughters, for life. This was exceptional as only free white women received exemptions from paying county tithes.

The second event was a court case held in 1655 whereby Anthony sued a white neighbor, Robert Parker, over a black slave, John Casor. Casor claimed he entered Virginia as an indentured servant, and his contract had ended seven years ago making him a free man. Casor’s claim was supported by Parker who convinced Anthony to release Casor to him to work on his farm. Anthony, on further reflection, sued Parker in county court for meddling with his slave. The court ruled in favor of Johnson finding no evidence of Casor possessing an indenture and ordered Casor returned to Anthony Johnson to serve as a slave for life. Parker was further ordered to pay all court costs. (T. H. Breen and Stephen Innes, “Mine Owne Ground”: Race and Freedom on Virginia’s Eastern Shore, 1640-1676, pages 8-15).

## Questions:

- 1) Based upon the known facts about Anthony and Mary Johnson, do you think other Africans and their descendants were able to gain their freedom in Virginia?
- 2) Based upon all the information furnished above, write a short paragraph or discuss with classmates what you have learned about the status of some Africans and their descendants living in Virginia during the years 1619-1655.

**Activity:** Reviewing various 17<sup>th</sup> century court cases and statutes passed by the General Assembly, the freely elected legislative branch of Virginia's colonial government, documentation exists to show how the legal status for people of color evolved into one of chattel slavery. Using the timeline below, chart the decline of legal rights for Africans and their descendants through the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century beginning in 1640, and write a paragraph about the loss of those legal rights or discuss it with your classmates. (**Suggestion:** Enlarge this page to 150% in order to read the timeline.)



As the timeline above shows, the legal status for Africans and their descendants changed dramatically over time from possessing some legal rights to having virtually none at all.

**Questions:**

- 1) Do you believe the loss of legal rights for black people in Virginia was due strictly to racism or do you think there may have been additional reasons for these laws? Explain your answer.
- 2) Notice that the erosion of legal rights for Africans and their descendents did not, in most cases, involve free people of color such as Anthony and Mary Johnson. Why do you think this was true? However, if you had been Anthony and Mary Johnson, or another free person of color in the colony, what would you have thought about the new laws limiting or taking away legal rights for Africans and their descendents that were being passed by the General Assembly meeting at Jamestown? What would you have done if you had been in the Johnson family? (The Johnson family, including the two sons and their families, moved from Virginia to the colony of Maryland in the mid-1660s. It is believed one reason they moved was to find more fertile soil, but do you think there may have been other reasons? Explain your answer).
- 3) The Black population in Virginia is given in the timeline at four different periods of time. Notice the correlation between the numbers of black people in the colony to the restriction of their legal rights. Do you think there is a direct relationship between the two occurrences? Explain your answer.
- 4) Tobacco, shipped to England and placed on sale there to earn money for Virginia planters, became the cash crop industry for Virginia throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In 1616, Virginia shipped 2,300 pounds of tobacco to England, and by 1699 the colony shipped 22,000,000 pounds! The more tobacco a farmer produced, theoretically, the more money he could make, however, the average single farmer could only harvest about 400 pounds of tobacco each year. To grow and harvest more tobacco required more people to labor in the tobacco fields. Most of this labor was provided by white indentured servants, many coming from England, but by the third quarter of the 17<sup>th</sup> century white immigrants coming to Virginia began to decline. To whom did the Virginia planters turn to make up this labor shortage in the last decades of the 17<sup>th</sup> century? (Refer to the Black population chart in the timeline.) Why do you think black people were not indentured in the last half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century as white people had been? Explain your answer. Do you think it was less expensive for a master to indenture a person for four to seven years; give that person their freedom providing them with clothes, tools and maybe a piece of land, or to enslave a person for life and their children as well? Do you think racism and economics played roles in the enslavement of black people in colonial Virginia? Explain your answer.

